A VERY SPECIFIC GOD
Romans 1:18-23; John 14:8-9
September 15, 1968

Whether he knows it or not, God is in big trouble today. Whether he recognizes the imminent danger, God is about to be talked right out of existence. And, really, who wouldn't be in trouble if very articulate men were busily documenting your obituary, trumpeting the news that you are dead on book bindings at $1.95 a copy? Who wouldn't be in trouble if 54% of the people believe the institution traditionally attributed to you is declining in influence? - which by the way, is what the latest Gallup survey reveals. Who wouldn't be in deep trouble if among the people still valiantly maintaining that you do exist, there were practically none who agreed about who you were, and what you were like, and what your intentions (your will, that is) happened to be? Who wouldn't be in deep trouble, if people were saying that things would be simpler all around if your name was just dropped from the every-day vocabulary of men?

God is in big trouble today, and I doubt very much that he's aware of it. But before we close the case, let's think a little deeper; let's think about what we, and and men generally believe or don't believe about God.

Bishop John Robinson who wrote a very provocative little book, Honest to God, has noted that: "Everyone of us lives with some mental picture of God 'out there' a God who exists above and beyond the world he has made, a God to whom we pray and to whom we go when we die - a self-subsistent divine being."

That is, each of us here has a very personalized " God Concept", a mental picture, a doctrine of God, if you will; even those who feel that religion is not worth much, still maintain some image, some belief that somewhere out there, there is a something or a someone. To be sure, these personal images are none too precise. One woman once described her mental picture of God as a "sacred blur", and that's probably as specific as a lot of people could get.

The contemporary impasse regarding God, I believe, is precisely in this total vaguery that has replaced what was once a fairly precise definition.

After all, it wasn't long ago that men believed some very specific things about God. And for them, it was adequate. God was simply a "super" man. To comprehend the power of God, for instance, all you had to do was think about a very strong man, magnify his strength a million times, and you had it. The same pattern maintained for other attributes such as love, mercy, justice. This system was based on the logical assumption that if God made men in his own image, then He - God himself- could be understood as a magnification of man. The philosophers and theologians call it "anthropomorphism" - and it means, simply defining God in terms of men; or put another ruder way, "seeing God as a kindly but powerful old man with a white robe and flowing beard."

That's been discarded, or at least the theologians have discarded it. Paul Tillich warned that you can't talk about God in terms of a being; rather God was the "ground of all being." That's fine for the scholars; it's even pretty good for anyone who thinks and concentrates on the nature of God. The trouble is that our sensitivity to God is heightened, not when we're engaged in rational thought, but usually in crises. And it's pretty difficult to utter a prayer to the "ground of all being."

That's where we are today. We have a mental image; we know rationally that the image isn't any good; we know God isn't a celestial problem solver - a "super" man, but we can't erase the image - we have to have something - so we're left hanging up in the air.

St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome in the middle of the first century raised a very similar problem for them like this: "What can be known about God is plain... Because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made... So they are without excuse."

That is what is called "natural theology" in the trade.. i.e. that God can be known to the rational nature of man, merely by observing the works of creation. Men are responsible for that much of a "God concept". I think we know a little bit about this. A glorious mountain arrayed in a kaleidoscope of color, a moment alone on the shore of an ocean; the intense emotion that comes to the surface when you see for the first time - an infant new born, and it's your child. We've all had these isolated experiences, these moments when the reality of God was indisputably clear.

That's what Natural Theology is all about, and it is an aspect of religious experience that we cannot discard. It is, however, fraught with difficulties. Paul knew there were problems here, and did not attempt to build his case for God on this - in fact he was more interested in preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, than he was in arguing about the existence of God.

But let's stay with Natural Theology for another minute or so. It is part of our religious experience - but its value in assisting us in forming a God concept is reduced by the precision and articulations of modern science. I can glory in the beauty of a mountain, and a geologist can tell me how the mountain erupted from the bowels of the earth, how the process of eruption and cooling will one day spell the cataclysmic end of the world. I can feel the creative power of God in my three-hour old baby, and at the same time know very well how and why this new life was created. In short, the precision of modern science has the effect of reducing the strength of natural theology. It's just not enough.

Of course, it ought to be noted that science and natural theology are not incompatible. Science is not telling us the whys of the created order, just the hows. And the fact is that some of the firmest believers in the existence of God are men who probe daily into the secrets of the natural world. But when all is said and done, natural theology does not provide a very precise image of God.

Now, with that small excursion behind us let's come back to our own situation. But with this one warning "Any definition of God that purports to be at all adequate would be an idol of the mind." (A. Vidber) A very wise man said that and it means that we can never lose sight of the fact that God is God, and man is man. However, it is not an excuse for vaguery either.

We are anthropomorphists: we have this idea, this image, in the back of our minds: we know that it's not adequate, and the result is a God who has very little to do with the world and our own lives. He's alright so long as we keep the picture in our imaginations: but he's no God to be exposed to the world.

Our dilemma is summarized by Douglas Rhymes as follows: "The answer to man's pain lies in the field of medical research; the answer to mens' needs lies in the right use of nuclear and economic research; the answer to man's sense of guilt lies in psychological analysis. It is not surprising that in this kind of atmosphere scant attention will be paid to God. ("Prayer", p. 13, Prayer in the Secular City)

The upshot of this is that the mental image of God, the idea in the mind, the anthropomorphic picture is simply unrelated to the realities of our lives. We assume that the pressures of life are on one side, while God is on some other side. With this supposition we find ourselves thinking about God only when somehow we are not involved in the pressures of life. For instance worship, or quiet moments before sleep. And the thought never occurs to us that God is involved with the pressures of life, that he's in the world not up there somewhere - that if we want to know what he's like it's better to forget the self-made image in the mind and start looking for evidences of his presence out where he is - in the life of the world.

When a Christian talks about a God concept that is the direction he must take, not an inadequate academic definition - but a point of the finger to the visible activity of God in the world. And then, I would suggest the Christian will begin to experience a very precise God.

You see, what we know about God, as Christians, must come from one source - or at least be filtered through that source. I mean, of course, the man who once said, "He who has seen me has seen the father." In his delightful little book, Your God Is Too Small, J. B. Phillips put it this way (p.109) "God may thunder his commands from Mt. Sinai and men may fear, yet remain at heart exactly as they were before. But let a man once see his God down in the arena as a man, suffering, tempted, sweating and agonized - finally dying a criminal's death - he is a hard man indeed who is untouched."

That is the image of God contained in the Gospel: that is the extent of Christian anthropomorphism. In a once and for all way God provided a portrait of himself for all men, and it wasn't a kindly old grandfather - or a sacred blur. It was a portrait of strength in weakness, a portrait of love deep enough to suffer and die, a portrait of power great enough to defeat even death. And the really good news of Christianity is that this God who once came in this manner, is still in the world doing those kinds of things.

I receive a publication which I believe most of you also receive, and in it I read a harsh critique of the World Council of Churches for being more concerned about sociology and politics than about God and things of the Spirit. That is a very valid critique to make, unless of course, you happen to believe that God not only loves the world, but is actively present in the world. Then politics and economics and sociology become focal - for it is there - where men live out their being that God is to be found. The Christian concept of God is a dynamic concept - he is a power, a force in the world and in the affairs of men. When men struggle for freedom - God is involved: when men die of hunger - God is there - weeping: when men are oppressed - God is there stirring them up and fanning the flame of dignity and self respect. When people worry, and grieve, and get sick and rejoice - God is present, and he's part of it all.

Shortly before he died, Robert F. Kennedy told a group of clergymen: "Religion is so important in life. I want my kids to live it. You all should not be talking about God up there so much. I want to know what God is like down here..." (Look Mag. July 1968)

A professional theologian couldn't have said it any better. "I want to know what God is like down here."

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about that God who is down here. Jesus himself called him Father; he didn't attempt to draw a picture.

Instead he said "Look at me, and you will see what God is like." And he loved and he stood firmly against bigotry and self-righteousness and he made friends with lonely and sad men, and he gave a prostitute a new reason for living. He loved so much that he laid down his life.

That's the God who is down here - in the world - in your life and mine - really a very precise God.

Amen.

O Thou whom we have learned to call Father, keep us from simple-mindedness when we think about thee. Make us sensitive to thy presence in the world - in the affairs of men and nations - and in the affairs of our own lives - through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.